

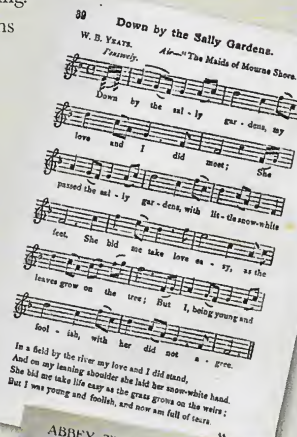


Craft hankering roaming up-homing up-anchoring

The west is an idea, not just a compass point. In Ireland western tales often featured St Brendan, the missionary voyager, or the island of the ever-young, Tír na nÓg. From such a 'double fountainhead' of Christian and pagan traditions Yeats hoped to find a new literature. Translations and retellings of Irish sagas like *Táin Bó Cúailnge* prompted Yeats's early poems and plays; medieval crafts inspired their making. They also inspired the 'beautiful old books' of delicate illustrations and the elaborate binding that housed them.

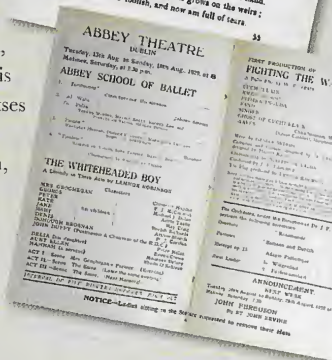
Song ballad and story, rann and song

Yeats always tested poetry by the ear. His father's refusal to send him to music lessons perhaps fuelled a lifelong obsession with the sound of words. Brought up as he was on the elaborate poetry of Shelley and Spenser, Yeats's determination to follow an oral tradition of 'ballad and story, rann and song' allowed him to define Irish writing, not as exclusively Gaelic or nationalist, but as spoken and sung, in opposition to English literature. Song and music features often in Yeats's poetry and plays.



Family a tongue to the sea cliffs

By marrying Susan Pollexfen of Sligo, John Butler Yeats had, he said, given 'a tongue to the sea cliffs'. He was thinking of his poet son, but there was more to the family than this. The Yeatses were the most talented artistic family ever to come out of Ireland. John Butler Yeats was himself an artist of distinction, his daughters were not only artists and embroiderers but pioneer printers, creating the simple designs of the Cuala Press, and the youngest of the family, Jack B. Yeats, became Ireland's greatest painter.



Plays All art is a collaboration

Dublin's Abbey Theatre began in the west. Conversations between Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Edward Martyn led to the establishment of what was then the Irish Literary Theatre. The Abbey served as a nursery for many of the leading Irish playwrights and actors of the twentieth century, yet it would have been nothing without John Millington Synge. Yeats met Synge in Paris and urged him west to 'express a life that has never found expression'. Through the Irish language, Synge's plays found a new way of speaking English, and plays like *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) went on to make waves in Dublin and round the world.

Coole My glory was I had such friends

Outside of his family, Lady Augusta Gregory was the biggest influence of Yeats's life. Her storytelling, her translations, her plays constitute an indestructible cultural heritage. Her nationalism transcended customary class barriers and her character provided an unflinching example. One of her greatest gifts was a lasting friendship, and for Yeats her home at Coole Park, Galway, was the centre of gravity of his life in Ireland.

